

THE WEDDING GIFTS OF PELEUS

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IN HIS MARRIAGE TO THE DIVINE THETIS, Peleus reached the height of human happiness. The gods themselves attended the wedding feast, entertained the bride and groom, and to match the occasion gave Peleus an immortal suit of armour and an immortal pair of horses.¹ In *Iliad* 16–19 these gifts play a significant role as a touchstone of divinity.

The armour outlasts the vigour of the aging Peleus and is inherited by his son. But the son, though vigorous, is short-lived. The armour in its unchanging immortality brings out the contrasting evils of age and of premature death:

ὁ δ' ἄρα ᾧ παιδὶ ὄπασσε
γηράς· ἀλλ' οὐχ υἱὸς ἐν ἔντεσι πατρὸς ἐγήρα.

When he grew old, he handed it down to his
son; but the son did not grow old in his
father's armour.

(*Il.* 17.196–197)

Achilles himself is never seen wearing this armour in the *Iliad*, but lends it to his substitute and double, Patroclus. With Patroclus there is a suggestion of inadequacy. His inability to carry the lance which had been inherited from Peleus² is matched by the blindness with which he ignores the cautions of Achilles and is thus killed by Apollo, Euphorbus, and Hector. The borrowed armour, including the helmet that had protected “the head and the gracious brow of a godlike man, of Achilles,” lies defiled in the dust:

μῖανθησαν δὲ ἕθειραι
αἷματι καὶ κονίησι· πάρος γε μὲν οὐ θέμις ἦεν
ἐπὶ κόκμον πῆληκα μαινεσθαι κονίησιν . . .

The hairs were defiled in the blood and dust.
Up till then it had not been right for the
helmet with its plume of horse hair to be
defiled in the dust.

(*Il.* 16.795–797)

¹The horses are from the gods as a whole (*Il.* 16.381, 867; 17.443) and from Poseidon in particular (*Il.* 23.277). In this there is no real contradiction (see Albert Severyns, *Les Dieux d'Homère* [Paris 1966] 26). That the horses are wedding gifts is never stated in the main text of the *Iliad*, but is a legitimate inference duly incorporated at 16.867a. The epithet ἄμβροτος, applied to the armour as well as the horses, is also applied in the *Iliad* to the winding-clothes of Sarpedon, but to no other artifact (cf. *Od.* 24.59, where it is applied to the winding-clothes of Achilles).

²As a gift of Cheiron the lance is probably not thought of in Homer as one of the wedding gifts, and in the legend is more properly associated with Peleus the great hunter. See Albin Lesky, “Peleus,” *RE* 1, Halbb. 37 (1937) 306.

This sacrilegious defilement (οὐ θέμις . . . μαινεσθαι) is the result of the armour's being worn by someone other than its rightful owner.

Next the armour becomes the death-suit of Hector, who at the height of his glory strips it from Patroclus and puts it on himself. Zeus notices and in a rare expression of pity exclaims on his folly and frailty alike:

ἂ δειλ', οὐδέ τί τοι θάνατος καταθύμιός ἐστιν,
ὅς δ' ἄν τοι σχεδὸν εἴσι· σὺ δ' ἄμβροτα τεύχεα δύνεις
ἀνδρὸς ἀριστῆος, τὸν τε τρομέουσι καὶ ἄλλοι.

Poor man, death, which is coming near, is
far from your mind as you don the immortal
armour of a chieftain before whom others
tremble.

(*Il.* 17.201–203)

Only Achilles, the suggestion seems to be, can presume to wear such armour. Not that it would have protected him forever. Hephaestus, who makes the magnificent replacement armour,³ has no illusions that even it can protect Achilles from his fate (*Il.* 18.464–467). What he does provide is a thing of terrible wonder to surpass the lost suit.⁴

Besides borrowing the Pelean armour, Patroclus also uses the chariot with the immortal horses Xanthus and Balius. To these is attached the mortal trace-horse Pegasus:

ὅς καὶ θνητὸς ἔων ἔπεθ' ἵπποις ἀθανάτοισι.

Even though he was mortal, he went with
immortal horses.

(*Il.* 16.154)

The combination is unwise, and in the ensuing battle the death of Pegasus among the immortal horses prefigures Patroclus' own death in the immortal armour.⁵

Xanthus and Balius are expertly disentangled from Pegasus by their driver Automedon. But an emotional attachment to their mortal masters is harder to break. The death of Patroclus immobilizes them in grief, and they stand as still as a tombstone, their heads bowed down and their eyes running with tears. Like the armour, the horses are defiled:

³For the complications brought on by the replacement armour, which necessitate a "fade-out" of the original suit, see Phanis J. Kakridis, "Achilleus' Rüstung," *Hermes* 89 (1961) 288–297.

⁴*Il.* 18.466–467 and 19.13–15.

⁵See Manu Leumann, *Homerische Wörter* (Basel 1950) 277. Such an unevenly matched troika, were it driven by Achilles, would have an obvious symbolic significance as representing the uneasy co-existence of the divine and the human within him. In fact the troika here is a likely source for the team of horses in Plato's *Phaedrus* myth. For the archaeology of the Homeric triga see P.A.L. Greenhalgh, *Early Greek Warfare* (Cambridge 1973) 27–29.

θαλερή δ' ἐμιαίνετο χαίτη
ζεύγλης ἐξεριπούσα παρὰ ζυγὸν ἀμφοτέρωθεν.

And their splendid manes were defiled as
they slipped from the pads on either side
of the yoke.

(*Il.* 17.439–440)

Zeus reacts to the grief of the defiled horses in much the same way as to the donning by Hector of the defiled armour:

ἂ δειλῶ, τί σφῶϊ δόμεν Πηληϊ ἄνακτι
θνητῷ, ὕμεις δ' ἐστὸν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε;
ἦ ἵνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχῃτον;

Poor horses, why did we give you, who are
ageless and deathless, to lord Peleus who
is mortal? Was it to make you suffer among
miserable mankind?

(*Il.* 17.443–445)

Zeus is not prone to pity, which makes it all the more remarkable that he should pity Hector and the horses in such close proximity. Furthermore, on the few other occasions in the *Iliad* when he does feel pity, he is moved either to action⁶ or at least to consultation.⁷ Only in these two passages does he indulge in a purely contemplative sadness. The passages are further linked by verbal similarities. Both Hector and the horses are addressed as *δειλοί* (a form of address used more often in scorn than in pity elsewhere in the *Iliad*). More significantly, the formula used at 17.200 and 17.442 to introduce each soliloquy is found nowhere else in the *Iliad*.⁸

The horses' predicament is generalized by tracing the trouble back to Peleus, whose immortal gifts underline his vulnerability to old age and death. The cruelty of letting divine horses become attached to human masters can be measured by a comparison with the horses of Poseidon, who lead emotionally uncomplicated and happy lives and are either in joyous motion or are munching ambrosial fodder (*Il.* 13.23–38). The mistake with Xanthus and Balias shows up the true misery of human existence:

οὐ μὲν γάρ τί πού ἐστιν δῖζυρώτερον ἀνδρὸς
πάντων ὅσσα τε γαῖαν ἐπι πνέει τε καὶ ἔρπει.

For of all things that breathe and move
over earth there is nothing more wretched
than man.

(*Il.* 17.446–447)

⁶*Il.* 8.245; 15.12; 17.648; 19.340; 24.332.

⁷*Il.* 16.431; 22.169.

⁸The same formula, *κινήσας δὲ (ῥα) κάρη προτὶ δὲ μυθήσατο θυμόν*, also occurs twice in the *Odyssey*, again in close proximity (*Od.* 5.285, 376) and again to indicate the emotion of a god, though this time the god is Poseidon and the emotion is indignation.

During the funeral games the horses share their grief with Achilles, and have no more desire than he to compete. They remember especially Patroclus' gentle grooming of their manes, which now as at his death droop to the ground in sign of mourning (*Il.* 23.279–284). We can only infer what they will feel at the death of Achilles himself.⁹

The position of Xanthus and Balius is mirrored by that of Thetis. Like them she was assigned to the mortal Peleus, and like them she is now involved in the next generation. She is in fact the most conspicuous gauge of Peleus' mortality, and in a remarkable inversion Achilles pities the goddess for her misalliance. He laments that Patroclus is dead, and that the beautiful armour he lent him is taken by Hector. Its very beauty, and its association with the divine happiness of Peleus, only enhances the bitterness of the moment:

τὰ μὲν Πηληϊῆ θεοὶ δόσαν ἀγλαὰ δῶρα
 ἥματι τῷ ὅτε σε βροτοῦ ἀνέρος ἔμβαλον εὐνῇ.
 αἰθ' ὄφελες σὺ μὲν αὖθι μετ' ἀθανάτης ἀλίσσι
 ναλεῖν, Πηλεὺς δὲ θνητὴν ἀγαγέσθαι ἄκοιτιν.
 νῦν δ' ἵνα καὶ σοὶ πένθος ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μυρίον εἴη
 παιδὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο . . .¹⁰

The gods gave it as a splendid gift to Peleus
 on that day when they bedded you with a mortal
 man. If only you had stayed put with the
 immortal sea nymphs, and Peleus had married
 a mortal bride! As it is, it was only to get
 endless grief in your heart at your son's
 death . . .

(*Il.* 18.84–89)

Thetis complains to Hephaestus of her mismatch in a similar way (*Il.* 18.429 ff.). She is the archetypal young mother of an only child, and that she will never age only prolongs her torment. Like the immortal horses, she is infected by too close a contact with humanity. (The major gods show a far more casual interest in their numerous human children.) This very closeness internalizes the tension between the divine and the human within Achilles himself. That is why in a range of sympathy

⁹Compare Briseis' tender recollections of Patroclus at *Il.* 19.282 ff. One can presume that Briseis too will grieve even more for Achilles than for Patroclus.

¹⁰The purposive ἵνα after ellipse parallels the ἵνα of Zeus' address to the horses at *Il.* 17.445. Both purposes are absurd, as is always the case in Homer with elliptical ἵνα (*Il.* 1.203; 7.26; 17.445; 18.88; *Od.* 4.710; 13.418). Note that all passages except *Il.* 18.88 use ἢ ἵνα, which rhetorically follows up a question introduced by τίπτε (τί *Il.* 17.445). For this use of ἢ see Denniston, *Greek Particles* 283 (2), and for ἢ . . . πού at *Od.* 13.418 see *ibid.*, 286 (ii). I wish to thank my colleague Professor K. A. Garbrah for his advice on this matter.

equal to that of Zeus he can pity the immortal Thetis and the mortal Peleus alike.

After the Patrokleia, the horses are next seen setting out with their true master and without a mortal trace-horse.¹¹ Once Achilles is fully dressed in his replacement armour, he mounts the chariot and calls on "his father's horses"—for they still belong to Peleus—and, blaming them for Patroclus' death, asks them to do better this time. With the same movement as at Patroclus' death, but in protest now rather than in grief, Xanthus hangs his head so that the mane flops to the ground.¹² Then miraculously the horse speaks. They will save him this time, he says, but cannot go against fate. Achilles, like his companion, is destined to die at the hands of a god and a man (*Il.* 19.404 ff.). Just as strange as the horse's speech is Achilles' natural acceptance of it. He feels neither terror nor wonder but, as later on towards Apollo, only irritation (*Il.* 19.419 = 22.14).¹³ Inured as he is to the miraculous, he needs no sobering advice (not even from the horse's mouth) and it is his freedom from illusion, his heightened awareness, that makes him greater than his fellows.¹⁴ His closeness to Thetis and the clear knowledge he gets from her puts him in a category above the other heroes and makes him more properly the owner of the immortal horses than even Peleus. Achilles alone can understand and live on familiar terms with the divine. Later, in the scene with Priam, he will cite his father as an example of extreme vicissitude, generalizing the gifts of the gods to cover his whole life up to its high point in the marriage of a mortal with a goddess (*Il.* 24.534 ff.). Peleus is now old and abandoned,¹⁵ and for him the gifts of the gods are bitterly ironic. But for Achilles, who is proof against irony, they are the natural accoutrements of greatness.

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¹¹Even in the Patrokleia Pegasus is ignored at *Il.* 16.380 ff. (Edouard Delebecque, *Le Cheval dans l'Iliade* [Paris 1951] 17). But at *Il.* 16.866–867 = 16.383/381, the reference to Xanthus and Balios alone is all too correct.

¹²*Il.* 19.405 f. (χαλῆν . . . ζυγόν) = *Il.* 17.439 f.

¹³Jean Audiat, *REA* 49 (1947) 49, is probably right to detect in ὀχθήσας an undercurrent of frustration as used in both these passages. He refines on 19.419 as follows: "A l'irritation contre cette prédiction inutile et déplaisante se joint le trouble irrité de cette impuissance à vaincre le seul adversaire qui puisse triompher de lui: l'inflexible destinée." His comment on 22.14 is similar: "Là encore, sous l'irritation contre la ruse du dieu, on sent percer une irritation secrète et inavouée de l'impuissance à lutter d'égal à égal contre une force divine, un secret dépit."

¹⁴Achilles' illusionless foreknowledge of his death (cf. *Il.* 21.106–113 and 22.365–366) contrasts markedly with Hector's mistaken confidence, e.g., at *Il.* 16.859–861 and contributes to the *terribilità* of the final books.

¹⁵At least typically so, though Homer varies the situation to suit his convenience. See Lesky, (above, note 2) 288 and Johannes T. Kakridis, *Homer Revisited* (Lund 1971) 28.